

Ellsberg

BUREAUCRATIC QUICKSAND: THE U.S. IN VIETNAM

by

Allen S. Whiting

University of Michigan

Paper prepared for delivery at the sixty-sixth Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles, September 8-12, 1970.

Copyright, 1970, The American Political Science Association.



## Summary

This paper analyzes selected aspects of bureaucratic behavior which increased the sense of U.S. involvement in and commitment to South Vietnam, despite a high priority given to "preserving the President's options." Covert operations, intelligence estimative procedures, and comparisons of policy planning in the Department of Defense and the Department of State are examined in this regard. Limited proposals for improvement are offered in each instance.

In theory, covert activity preserved "options" because it kept the U.S. public commitment at a low level of visibility while signalling to Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow the U.S. willingness to escalate. However, limits on options emerged as (1) vested interests in Washington, Saigon, and Vientiane tended to justify and expand covert activities, (2) assumptions of irreversible U.S. commitment proliferated at lower bureaucratic levels, and (3) moral commitments to indigenous groups (Meo, montagnard, etc.) expanded as they risked their lives and foreclosed their future political options in response to offers of arms and training, on the assumption that the U.S. would not quit and could not be defeated by Hanoi. Yet at the highest level, confidence in maintaining "all options" persisted as covert involvement succeeded in eluding Congressional inquiry and public attention.

Another constraint on options was the weighting of intelligence estimates by omission and inputs. While repeated queries were put to "the intelligence community" on the likely consequences of U.S. escalation, no systematic study was asked about the probable consequences of U.S. disengagement. The widely vaunted "domino theory" was never subjected to dispassionate analysis by country experts. Meanwhile in the formal analysis of escalation prospects, the structure and composition of the working groups and the United States Intelligence Board tended to place more positive emphasis on military escalation and threat thereof than would have been warranted given the views of the political specialists.

A third constraint lay in the imbalance between the preparation of military and political options. As early as May 1964 the Pentagon was actively preparing a detailed, comprehensive list of various courses of action and targets of attack in North Vietnam. As late as April 1965, however, the Department of State was enjoined from any study or systematic discussion of a negotiated settlement in South Vietnam on any basis other than the simple cessation of insurgency and all North Vietnamese assistance to the NLF. In effect, this left the White House with a wide range of military choice, from inaction to massive escalation, but no political choice except a commitment to Saigon.

These bureaucratic considerations did not, in themselves, determine U.S. policy in Vietnam, but they suggest certain shortcomings and mistaken assumptions which might be rectified or guarded against in future situations which may confront the U.S.



# Bureaucratic Quicksand: The U.S. in Vietnam

by

Allen S. Whiting

## Introduction

Although a mountain of memoirs may eventually emerge from participant-observers of U.S. policy in Vietnam, the "lessons to be learned" are likely to be seen in simplistic "never again" terms unless political scientists apply their diagnostic skills to those policy-making procedures which permitted so monstrous a miscalculation to occur. The historians can render judgment of individual psyches and roles, and of the ideological compulsions inherent in America of the 1960's. Much can be accounted for by idiosyncratic behavior and the imperialism cum idealism which imbued that generation matured in the memory of Munich and the Marshall Plan. But the everyday evolution of policy is still conditioned primarily by process continuity and change. Just as its forward inertia may be incrementally fuelled by repetitive behavior so too its overall course may be gradually modified by piecemeal correction.

This paper focuses on selected aspects of the bureaucratic input to U.S. policy in Vietnam which highlight its incremental nature and which are subject to change by aware and concerned leadership in Washington. They are not singled out as uniquely responsible for the errors of policy nor are they intended as revelations of iniquity. Policy is not a spacecraft. When



an Appollo mission aborts the malfunction may be isolated and identified among a half dozen of the more than one million components. Rarely can a policy failure, however, be made the responsibility of a few men or a single bureaucratic entity without the certain risk of simplifying beyond recognition the actual process of decision-making. Furthermore, few persons command an overview of the process so as to be able with any degree of accuracy to assign the correct weight to each input. A final limitation concerns the need to generalize in lieu of illustrating by specific example where constraint is dictated by the professional and personal obligations assumed by those who participate in government.<sup>1</sup> The dilemma is a profound one. Total silence submits the society to the unlikely chance of the system correcting itself. Total revelation destroys the sense of confidence necessary to the acceptance of responsibility by all parts of the system. Any attempt to steer a middle course between this Scylla and Charibdis is bound to err on one side or the other. Hopefully whatever untoward consequences result will not impair the utility of the exercise.

Of the many controversies centering on U.S. policy in Vietnam, one that seems the most endurable, perhaps because of its insusceptability of absolute resolution, concerns whether President Kennedy would have escalated American involvement as did President Johnson. Wholly aside from the partisan and ad hominum aspects of this dispute, intellectual interest derives from the alternative merit of those who see the President as a victim of "lock-



in" as opposed to those who argue his powers of choice at each succeeding point. Without attempting to answer this question definitively, it is our contention that to the degree the President relied upon standard decision-making procedures, i.e. the staffing of problems and bureaucratic "feedback" after the decision, he walked into quicksand. This is not a new phenomenon nor is it the only criterion by which to evaluate a President's behavior. However it is a particularly ironic development in Vietnam, given the highly touted objective during both administrations of "keeping open the President's options." To be sure, President Kennedy and President Johnson always retained the ultimate option of approving or vetoing individual policy proposals, whether a marginal increase in U.S. advisers or the deployment of massive combat forces. But the basic factors which tended increasingly to limit their sense of option and as well as the actual options themselves deserve attention.

In the brief span of this paper, three bureaucratic constraints on policy options will be examined: (1) the consequences of covert activities, (2) the limitations of the intelligence estimative process, and (3) the imbalance in the preparation of military as opposed to political options. Specialists in organization and information theory will find much that is familiar, as will those whose governmental focus is bureaucratic behavior. No pretense is made of breaking new ground or refining old concepts. However because these areas remain beyond the purview of most scholars it is hoped that reminding those concerned with Vietnam of



their relevance will restore a dimension of perspective otherwise missing. Moreover for those entering the policy arena, acquaintance with these past phenomena may provide a caution for the future.

#### Covert Operations: Cause and Effect

It is commonplace to decry covert operations as immoral, illegal, and unresponsive to democratic controls. Less frequently are they examined for their effect upon the decision-making process. Yet without an understanding of their impact on policy, one of the more troublesome aspects of covert operations remains ignored. This is particularly true in Southeast Asia from 1961 to 1965. Clandestine activities in Laos and thinly disguised "advisory" roles in South Vietnam eventually led to the combination of South Vietnamese seaborne raids and American electronic intelligence probes which resulted in the Gulf of Tonkin crisis. These developments played an important part in deepening the U.S. commitment beyond that perceived by policy-makers at the time.

Covert activities are not uniquely American nor did they begin in 1961. However they took on unprecedented peacetime importance for Washington with President Kennedy's assertion that the United States was engaged in a long "twilight war" with communism. As he defined it,

This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin -- war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of combat;



by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him... It requires a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of military training.<sup>2</sup>

This legitimized widespread participation in operations normally reserved for wartime and otherwise limited to the clandestine arm of government. The rationale was threefold. First, it signalled to the communists a willingness and ability to do battle on their own terms, unencumbered by the constraints of traditional American policy. Second, it denied this signal to a Congress, press, and public, eschewing the constraints of legality imposed by the Geneva accords of 1954 and 1962. Third, it avoided publicly committing the President personally or the United States officially, thereby preserving options of escalation or disengagement, depending upon the responses of enemy and ally.

The actual effects differed markedly from those anticipated by advocates of "fighting fire with fire." True, the enemy perceived the signal but instead of being deterred he responded by escalating his own covert attack.<sup>3</sup> Having no responsibility to a domestic public or press and insensitive to international criticism, Hanoi could easily afford to match and surpass any American effort at clandestine operations. More important for our focus, however, the ease of eluding public purview, in particular the nagging Congressional inquiry and nettlesome press questions, fostered a naive confidence that "we can always deny it." From 1962 with the introduction of the U.S. Air Force into combat in South Vietnam, to 1964 with the use of bases in Thailand for "armed



reconnaissance" in Laos, there was little concern with the "credibility gap" into which the administration was to fall in defeat.<sup>4</sup> This success at deception nurtured the illusion at higher levels that the President's options remained essentially unchanged regardless of the scope or nature of clandestine activities.

In practice, however, the "feedback" effects were multiple and all in the direction of expanding on the U.S. commitment. First, the ethos of the time placed a premium on "positive" and "tough-minded" thinking. Although the planning and review of covert activities was dominated by non-CIA civilians from the White House and the State Department, these persons were not expected to question the assumptions which underlay the administration's approach but to improve its strategy and tactics. Contrary to popular belief, the problem was not one where the CIA worked nefariously behind the backs of unsuspecting innocents. Rather it resembled the sorcerer's apprentice playing at the art of witchcraft without knowing how to get the genie back into the bottle.

Once the process began vested interests in Washington, Saigon, Vientiane, and Bangkok argued that these operations were highly promising and deserved more support. Interservice rivalries resulted in the strange spectacle of the Army, Navy, and Air Force competing to provide military muscle to activities under the field control of the CIA.<sup>5</sup> Mutual backscratching, common enough when competing agencies cooperate to share the bureaucratic spoils, received added incentive through the unique opportunity for testing



men, weapons, and tactics in action which would otherwise be denied except for war -- an unlikely contingency in 1962-64. This made independent judgment difficult, if not politically hazardous beyond that already communicated by the "tough-minded" White House staff.

It would be wrong to depict all those involved as merely calculating their interests and acting accordingly. On the contrary, except for the very top officials who remained sensitive to the "options" notion and debated how long we should "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem," lower level belief held that the U.S. commitment was indeed irreversible, that the "domino theory" determined policy, and that regardless of the risks or costs, we would fight to the end against communist control of Indochina. To be sure, the political sensitivity of this being a policy of limited liability necessitated a certain amount of deliberate deception. Beyond this, however, as the number of participants expanded, as memory of the original policy faded, and as new replacements succeeded program initiators, the sense of commitment increased concomitantly. This sense in turn was communicated upward in program evaluations and recommendations. It was also communicated in the field to Vietnamese, Montagnard, Meo, and others who were essential to the covert operations. For them, the credibility of major U.S. commitment was manifest in the increasing amount of American officials, equipment, and expenditure. Since it was obvious that Hanoi could not defeat



Washington and there was no reason to believe the U.S. would stop at less than total victory in the South, various groups risked their lives and foreclosed their political options in response to the American offer of arms and training. This in turn increased the American sense of moral responsibility for continuing and expanding a policy which nonetheless was still seen at the highest level in terms of limited liability.

Under these circumstances "feedback" increasingly enmeshed the policy-makers in a web of commitment. Trips to and cables from the field suffered from built-in limitations and biases, inevitably arguing for "more of the same." Journalists who reported differently were discounted as headline grabbers or worse, especially since any reporting, favorable or not, jeopardized the entire rationale on which covert operations rested. The blend of personal and professional interest which placed one "on the team" by "playing the game" made criticism, perhaps ostracism, heavy penalties to pay for questioning the propriety, utility and feasibility of fighting the "twilight war." Out of this incremental growth of involvement at the covert level came assumptions of commitment which underlay the overt bombing of North Vietnam and the dispatch of combat forces to South Vietnam.

It is obviously impossible to impose controls on a bureaucracy which can effectively immunize it against such universal behavioral patterns. However it is possible to strengthen the points of reference where the President and his top advisers can receive



responsible guidance on covert operations. Three criteria seem mandatory in this regard. First, those with this responsibility must have constant and close acquaintance with the context within which covert operations are recommended and implemented. The justifiable sensitivity and complexity of such operations puts their fair assessment beyond the ken of part-time participants, whether "insiders" or "outsiders." Second, these persons must be free of vested interest involvement. Neither present status nor future promotion should be affected by the size or success of covert activity. Third, they must have the resources and the authority to investigate as well as to report to the President. Without these powers and prerogatives, they will be bureaucratically boxed in, dependent on others for information and for transmission of their views.

The Kennedy administration gradually came to recognize these principles in its approach to the problem. In the field, a special directive from the President armed ambassadors with appropriate powers and responsibilities. In Washington, a special committee in the Department of State was established to provide a point of clearance and monitoring on an interagency basis. Outside observation was invited through the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. Unfortunately, the ethos of the so-called "White House Mafia" mitigated against a "negative" or "soft" attitude, while the personnel qualifications of various "watchdogs" in Washington and the field often fell short of the need. The Department of State's top representatives came increasingly



to have only perfunctory interest in the details of covert activity. Preoccupation with other policy matters and a lack of professional competence combined to dilute the force and vigor with which the responsible official pursued this particular duty. While testimony to Congress and the press correctly claimed that the Department reviewed all clandestine operations in advance, such review did not necessarily involve a substantive examination or a fundamental questioning of the implications which followed from these activities.

The problem is a formidable one. Career mobility across department lines may broaden and enrich the perspective of individuals as well as of institutions, but it can also dilute departmental loyalty. For an institution such as State with its weak political position in the Washington arena, appointment of former CIA officials to positions associated with approval or review of covert operations would seem to be a special hazard to be avoided except under exceptional circumstances. What is gained in professional familiarity with the problem may be more than offset by the understandable, albeit unconscious, tempering of challenge with which the officer engages his former associates. One alternative is to train selected foreign service officers in the arts and crafts of clandestine activity, sufficient to let them comprehend its assumptions and implications, its assets and liabilities, in particular policy contexts. Innocence in such matters may be a point of pride in the foreign service, but ignorance can be costly when it affects the basis of assessment



available to higher officials. Until this deficiency is remedied in the field and in Washington no mere memoranda or constitution of still another committee will solve the problem.

### The Intelligence Estimative Process

Less attention has been focused on the intelligence estimative process since the Cuban missile crisis than might have been expected in view of the magnitude of miscalculation that has attended the Indochina War. Charitable "outsiders" have lamented the lack of experts on Vietnam, particularly among scholars, who allegedly would have alerted policy makers to the fallacies underlying their assumptions.<sup>6</sup> This underestimates the skills and talents available in Washington while overstating the degree to which policy is decided by intellectual rationality. Knowledgeable "insiders" have tended to avoid raising the question out of deference to the sensibilities of the various groups euphemistically lumped together under the benign rubric of "the intelligence community." This shows appropriate respect for the difficult task of predicting human behavior on the basis of fragmentary data under the pressures of the Washington environment. But surely the vast expenditures of money and manpower devoted to the collection and evaluation of intelligence come to naught if a final "intelligence gap" separates the best qualified political judgment from the high policy-maker. To the extent that gap can be closed policy will at least gain in anticipating the consequences of action even if it is impelled to action by other considerations.



Again, the Kennedy administration sought to improve the process whereby the various views of military, economic, and political intelligence specialists would be communicated in a systematic and co-ordinated manner to the top levels of government. The vehicle for such communication is called the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the shorter, crash effort version being known as the Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE). Drafted initially by the most qualified agency, depending upon subject matter, it is worked over by an interagency group of specialists before being tabled at the United States Intelligence Board (USIB). An impressive array of intellectual talent assembled in the Office of National Estimates in CIA and the express admonition for dissenters to express their views in footnotes aims at a sharply focused and incisive document. Chaired by the Director of the CIA or his deputy, USIB comprises the directors of intelligence from State, Defense, Army, Navy, Air, the Intelligence Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and representatives from the FBI, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the National Security Agency. This group reviews the entire draft, accepting, amending, or resubmitting it for further work by the specialists. Once the estimate has the imprimatur of USIB, it goes to the highest policy officials as the "best guess" of "the intelligence community."

Unfortunately, Vietnam revealed several shortcomings in this process. The initial fault lay somewhat outside the estimative system which basically only attempted to answer those questions put to it by policy-makers. In theory USIB could originate



studies on its own but various impediments, political and operational, nullified this in practice. This resulted in the strange phenomenon whereby no serious examination was ever made of the assumptions underlying the "domino theory." First enunciated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower at a news conference in 1954, the "theory" posited the steady expansion of communist insurgency throughout Southeast Asia as a consequence of success by Hanoi in Laos or South Vietnam. Although taken as gospel by many in high position, it was sufficiently disputed by individual academic and government specialists on particular countries as to require critical examination before serving as a basic rationale for committing U.S. forces to the defense of South Vietnam. Sufficient expertise was at hand on the various countries in the area as well as on the strategy, tactics, capabilities, and intentions of those in Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow who might be supporters of "people's wars of national liberation." Yet no direct study of this fundamental premise was asked of the "intelligence community" during the critical years of 1962-5.

Several inhibitions on asking this question of intelligence experts may be speculated upon, although it is unclear which was most influential in preventing the inquiry. First of all, it would have brought into doubt a canon of the Cold War that had underlay American policy in Southeast Asia for ten years. The "domino theory" had been implicit in 1950 when the Truman administration responded to Korea by incorporating the Taiwan Strait and Indochina into its immediate calculations.<sup>7</sup> It was



explicit in the Eisenhower-Dulles rationale for the offshore islands involvement of 1954-5 and 1958 as well as for SEATO. Too many vested interests and too much internalized belief lay in the "domino theory" to bring it into question as of 1962.

In addition, however, the mystique of Washington as an action-oriented, "positive thinking" community mitigated against exploring the consequences of passivity, or in this case disengagement. Estimative studies would be undertaken for the most imaginative flights of fancy if they involved "courses of action," but "courses of inaction" simply were not worthy of explicit examination even though they might very well be adopted as the residual outcome of rejecting proposed actions. A third consideration involved the fear of an intentional or inadvertant "leak" given the wide involvement of persons and agencies in the USIB process. It was one thing to worry a prospective enemy with possible U.S. action, tipped off through a press story. It was something else to worry an extant ally and to encourage an expectant enemy with knowledge of the fact that disengagement was "under study" in Washington.

A separate problem arose from the gap between the analyst's perspective and that of the policy-maker. This was particularly evident when high officials differed sharply amongst themselves, as with the rationale for escalation. For some, threatening Hanoi with air attack was simply to signal the U.S. determination



underlying the answers, therefore, often differed from those behind the questions. This left the two sides, those who queried and those who responded, with a communications gap that sometimes reduced the relevance of the estimate for the problems faced by policy. The problem is endemic when, as in Vietnam, policy is a subtle fusion of limited military moves undertaken for eliciting political responses, while the conventional assignment of estimative responsibility separates military from political analysis with a tendency toward confrontation rather than collaboration between the two.

A final shortcoming of the questioning process lay in the failure to ask what would be the consequences of miscalculation by the U.S. Admittedly such an approach invites the most dire predictions both from Cassandra-like pessimists and from those who seek bureaucratic survival by recommending inaction rather than action. Nonetheless it would seem a necessary effort to separate out the low from the high risk initiative. Regardless of how certain is the confidence in success, the policy-maker is better advised when he is made aware of the chances and consequences of failure. Too often this unpleasant task is left to the opponents of policy or alternatively, dismissed out of hand by policy advocates. Presumably intelligence estimators who are accustomed to wearing "the enemy's" hat for predicting his behavior can more easily don the "devil's advocate" guise in arguing against their own prognosis.



Aside from the problem of what questions were asked, the process of developing the estimate had within it impediments to arriving at the much vaunted "best guess." As is clear from the composition of USIB, political -- or better, social science -- inputs come from a minority of the group, i.e. State and the CIA. State's INR was traditionally a financially starved, low status section, avoided by the more able foreign service officers. While size does not automatically beget quality, INR's duties within the Department coupled with its NIE involvement to place an inordinate burden on the half dozen officers responsible for all of China and Indochina. Additional political analysis came from CIA, usually in fairly close accord with the INR experts. However, most groups in the estimate process were chaired by CIA, with USIB always headed by the Director or his deputy. Thus an interest in achieving sufficient consensus to produce a draft by a designated deadline often reduced the willingness of CIA's political analysts to join those of State in battle against the more numerous military participants.

Numbers alone do not win wars but they do help in interagency argument. The sheer ability to remain sharp and to persist in one's view through twelve hours of redrafting is at least in part a function of fatigue. Fatigue in turn is a consequence of how much relief can be provided for the embattled analyst. Here State was usually at a disadvantage. At the final USIB table, the serried ranks of Pentagon officers and staff presents an impressive array of strength against the two or three INR representatives with their similar number of CIA counterparts. More-



We have already noted the consensual interest affecting the CIA participation as chairman. This desire to maximize agreement and minimize dissent easily slips into a position of mediator, thereby diluting the political input of CIA. In addition, the implicit code of the civilian specialist, especially if he is an honest intellectual or a well-mannered foreign service officer, is to admit reason in the other man's position, to recognize "life is not a series of blacks and whites but shades of grey," and to concede the fallibility of political prognosis given the paucity of "hard intelligence" and uncertainties of human behavior. In short, he is predisposed to compromise any view he holds. By contrast, the code of the military specialist, whether or not he wears mufti, is to strike a hard position and defend it to the last, to exploit weakness and vulnerability in the opposite number's argument, and to "win" the argument much as he would "win" a battle.

These characteristics impinge on the estimative process in several ways. By formal agreement, the respective agencies are responsible for their primary areas of expertise, military being Pentagon, economic and sociological for CIA, and political for State. This separation is observed, however, mainly by those responsible for military matters denying any competence to others in this field while freely insisting on their own political judgments as equal to those of their opposite numbers. In part, this asymmetry is justified by the ignorance of many foreign service officers in weapons, logistics, and strategy. In part



it comes from the technical complexity of modern warfare compared with the everyday conversational nature of politics. On the one side stand the "hard facts" of weaponry manifested in statistics on firepower, bomb loads, destruction capability, and enemy vulnerability. On the other side the "soft" analysis of enemy intentions and resistance capability invites assault by sceptics and unsureness by advocates. Underlying these factors is the inherent optimism of the military as a "can do" service, as against the pessimism of the political specialist who feels the frustration of impotence, fighting in a world of words which conceal forces he may comprehend but not hope to control.

One final point is worth noting in this regard. Hierarchy and discipline are a natural part of life in the Pentagon. Anarchy and indiscipline may not truly characterize things at State, but by comparison its permissiveness and independence might reasonably be perceived in these terms, at least from across the Potomac. While this less directed atmosphere benefits State's intelligence analyst in arriving at and expressing his own views, it can be a definite detriment in his confrontation at the estimate table. "The Chiefs simply won't buy that" or "my boss will kill me if I come back with that" is a familiar plea from the DIA representative, appealing to the better side of his State counterpart whom both sides know to be wholly unfettered so far as the wishes of superiors are concerned.<sup>8</sup> Once again the bargaining process begins, to the advantage of military as opposed to political judgment.



The cumulative effect of the institutional and behavioral factors moved the formal estimates on U.S. escalation a considerable way from the initial consensus of Policy Planning-  
INR-CIA. The fundamental question remained the same: what would be the most likely results of U.S. military action. However the frames of reference brought to the question by the USIB participants and the process through which they argued them so diluted the political experts' views as to result in estimates which encouraged rather than discouraged, experimenting in graduated escalation. The analysis did not promise cheap, quick, and easy victory. But neither did it delineate the darker aspects of stalemate in terms of time and effort required to secure Saigon's control, ultimately to involve seven years, a half million U.S. troops, and more than 43,000 American dead.

It would be wrong to place undue emphasis on intelligence estimates as a causal element in the decision to bomb the North or send troops to the South. On the one hand, considerations other than those offered by intelligence analysts motivated President Johnson and his immediate advisors in 1964 and 1965. On the other hand, those who differed with the wording of estimates, as participants or as observers, had alternative ways of communicating their own views to higher officials. A recommendation of the United States Intelligence Board is only of marginal influence in the overall policy process. To the degree it signals a "no go" or a "go" there is at the least an added constraint or absence thereof to the decision. But to the extent it "waffles" with "weasle-words" that dilute the strength of



conviction behind the estimate, it is of little or no use at all, except perhaps to provide protective cover for the bureaucratic rump whatever the consequences. In this regard, the Kremlinology of reading intelligence estimates can be an art in itself, differing considerably from those who fought through the drafting process as compared with those seeking to utilize the documents selectively to buttress their own policy preferences.

Despite these shortcomings, the intelligence estimate seems essential if there is to be the fullest policy payoff from the billions of dollars and manhours expended in the collection and evaluation of intelligence. The military caveat to concentrate on capability and ignore intention is well-taken for those who must propose defense systems based exclusively on vulnerability to enemy attack. It does not suffice, however, for choosing among those systems where cost effectiveness still leaves an inordinate burden on defense expenditures. Nor do capability estimates alone suffice to calculate enemy responses to U.S. initiatives, either in terms of the physical destruction he is expected to suffer or by the transplanted logic of a Pentagon planner theoretically placed in his position. In short, the co-ordinated intelligence estimate serves important functions. Changes in the process should aim at improving its political-military balance. One step in this direction would be to divest CIA of its production function as chairman of USIB, thereby relieving its analysts and leadership of the conflict between contention and consensus formation. In place of CIA a member of the National Security Council (NSC) could profitably assume this



responsibility discerning the strengths and weaknesses of differing positions throughout the process so as to better brief the President on the depth of agreement and division masked by the formal prose. This would violate the sacrosanct separation of policy and intelligence which, officially at least, prevails under the existing system. However proper discretion by the NSC representative could preserve the spirit if not the letter of the principle.

As with covert operations, inherent weaknesses in the Department of State's position might be corrected somewhat by educating foreign service officers in military affairs. While they could not be equally conversant with their military counterparts on the technical specifications of weapons, they could master the vocabulary, contemporary concepts, and the history of recent warfare sufficiently to probe the claims made on behalf of one side or the other. Neither passive obeisance nor ignorant skepticism can meet the challenge posed by Pentagon position papers.

Ideally, of course, military and political analysts would collaborate in a more neutral, open-ended atmosphere, each free of organizational constraints and compulsions so far as a predetermined outcome was concerned. Conceivably reorganization of DIA and its relationship with USIB might facilitate this. Perhaps seconding officers to ONE/CIA would separate them from the inevitable Pentagon pressures, as indeed has happened in



assignments to State. Alternatively military and political contributions to the estimative process might be more clearly separated and identified throughout the actual drafting while remaining subject to mutual scrutiny and comment. This would eliminate the deceptive equality of "one-man, one-vote" which subsumes under "the majority believed" as against "a minority felt" a totally disparate range of expertise. While expertise is relative and never absolute, it deserves mutual respect on both sides of the Potomac. Identifying it as such in the intelligence estimate would serve both drafter and reader.

#### Military Planning; Political Passivity

As early as May 1964 the Joint Chiefs of Staff worked up a target list for the bombing of North Vietnam. Acting at the direction of the Secretary of Defense, they mapped out a wide range of choice, according to the available weaponry and the desired objectives. To be sure, intelligence was imperfect; results did not always accord with plans. Nonetheless it would be hard to fault the Department of Defense for not being ready to do whatever was asked of it, on relatively short notice, and with unprecedented limitations in terms of operational freedom in the field.

By contrast, not before May 1965 did the Department of State authorize preparation of a political plan for ending the war on anything other than simple submission by Hanoi to Washing-



ton's will. Even then this initial group was without staff, restricted in numbers, and operated under such secrecy as to make its short-lived existence of little value. Prior to this time it was anathema for any person or paper to propose ending the war on a compromise basis which might contain sufficient interest for the communists as to induce them to negotiate rather than fight to a finish. President Johnson's celebrated pledge to "talk anytime, anywhere" was appropriate public rhetoric in the spring of 1965. But as bombing of the North increased with no visible diminution of enemy will, attention at State focused primarily on how to ward off various peace messengers anxious to act as go-betweens, while preparing for the political context and consequences of massive troop deployments to the South. In short, the President had a multitude of military choices, carefully planned and neatly packaged. He had virtually no political choice except to continue the war until Hanoi quit; at least no such choice was forthcoming from the department presumably responsible for designing it.

We have already noted how the Policy Planning Council initiated the study of escalation as a means of ending the war. As the appropriately designated office, removed from the daily pressures of the Saigon cables, it presumably could have shouldered the burden of examining alternative "mixes" of compromise as a basis for negotiations, moving the confrontation from the jungle to the conference table. Given the prevailing sentiment and perceptions in Washington, Saigon, and Hanoi in 1964-5, this was admittedly a near impossible task. Something



would have had to give somewhere. But how much, at what point, with what costs and probable consequences, was never ascertained because the subject was taboo in State.

This failure to provide political options for ending the war is especially striking given the memories of the men responsible for planning hostilities against North Vietnam. They had experienced the war with Japan as a total, unlimited effort which included nuclear attacks and the certain threat of ultimate invasion. Yet it had ended through negotiations short of "ultimate surrender," the terms of which had been closely argued and refined in Washington before transmission to Tokyo. They knew the Korean armistice had come only after two years of arduous talks and continued combat. Now they proposed to launch hostilities against an enemy who was assured by private as well as public channels he would not suffer nuclear attack, invasion, or even total destruction through conventional bombing. But instead of negotiating a compromise settlement, he was expected to "signal a willingness to talk" if we lifted the bombing, at the same time promising to "stop his aggression against the South." Then he was to "withdraw his forces of aggression" whereupon we would remove U.S. troops from South Vietnam.

To a certain extent, weakness in the estimative process facilitated this political passivity. Had the outcome been postulated in starker terms of stalemate, planning for genuine negotiations, at least as a contingency if not a necessity, might have been more in demand. Wishful thinking led some to



conjecture that there would be no formal end to the war, "The enemy will simply fade away. One morning we'll get up and he won't be there." This was a minor factor, however, compared with the conviction of those in high position who held that compromise was wholly unacceptable. They saw U.S. interests in securing South Vietnam against communist power advanced through the barrel of a gun as so great as to require the expenditure of every effort, regardless of time or magnitude, to deny Hanoi its objectives. This made for a sensitivity to any talk of negotiations since they could not be expected to meet the single-minded purpose of our escalation at a time when the enemy was strong and Saigon was weak. On the contrary, a communist intimation of interest in talks must, according to this interpretation, be regarded as a trap to divide and weaken allied resolve, undermining South Vietnamese confidence in our willingness to stay at any price and strengthening the debate between "doves" and "hawks" in Washington.

This sensitivity explains the total separation of working-level experts from higher policy levels whenever any activity occurred involving possible negotiatory probes, at least down to the massive U.S. troop deployment in July 1965. To be sure, all sectors of the "intelligence community" were bombarded with queries from superiors for interpretation of every communist editorial and official statement emanating from Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow. Thousands of man-hours went into the textual exegesis of speeches and interviews, arguing the significance of shifts



from "the" to "a" or from "would" to "could." Top officials assured Congressmen and reporters that "all our antennae" were alert for any "signal." The critical time for such detection was between the first threat of escalation in President Johnson's Los Angeles speech of February 1964 and the major military commitment of summer 1965. Yet throughout this period those responsible for interpreting communist intentions were never made privy on any continuous, systematic basis to the secret information emanating from self-appointed or authorized mediatory contacts in Paris, Algiers, and elsewhere. Furthermore they remained unaware of planned U.S. actions, military and political, that might impact on Hanoi as "responses" to its "signals." Conversely few of those planning military actions had access to information which would have sensitized them to the unintended political import of specific actions in a particular context. This left the total responsibility for planning and co-ordinating all political and military actions as well as for interpreting communist responses on less than a handful of individuals who were also the highest officials of the world's most powerful and active government.

Such compartmentalization is commonplace. Its normal justification in terms of secrecy and efficiency is strengthened by well-established behavioral patterns, observable both in routine bureaucracy and in crisis management.<sup>9</sup> Our task, however, is not merely to reconfirm the norms of bureaucratic behavior but to identify those areas of activity which increased our involvement in Indochina, which narrowed the political options



available to the President, and which may be susceptible to at least partial improvement by an aware and concerned leadership. In this regard, one illustration of the problem, the essentials of which have already been made public, should suffice. As later recounted by Adlai Stevenson to Eric Sevaried, U.N. Secretary General U Thant, alarmed by the Gulf of Tonkin crisis, inquired of Hanoi through the Ne Win government of Burma whether North Vietnam would be willing to meet secretly with the United States in Rangoon. Although he received an affirmative reply in September, U Thant waited until after the November election to put the same query to Washington through Stevenson as American Ambassador to the U.N. Stevenson received a negative reply from Secretary of State Dean Rusk but for reasons of his own he did not relay this immediately to U Thant. Apparently hoping for reconsideration in Washington, Stevenson again approached Rusk in December whereupon he was instructed to inform the Secretary General immediately of the American position. Presumably Hanoi waited three months between acquiescing in talks and receiving the U.S. rejection.

It is obviously impossible to determine what motivated Hanoi's response to the U Thant query. Conceivably it thought the U.S. was suing for peace, using U Thant as mediator. Talks under these conditions would have broken down immediately. Perhaps it saw no prospect of real negotiations but felt impelled to acquiesce for "the record," not trusting Ne Win or U Thant to keep North Vietnam's response confidential. Again, divisions of opinion may have existed in Hanoi as to the strategy and



tactics of talking and fighting, with "hard-liners" temporarily deferring to "soft-liners" in expectation of the talks being susceptible to blockage at a later point. Alternatively Hanoi may have agreed on the calculation that "leaking" the secret Rangoon meetings in Saigon would undermine South Vietnamese confidence in the U.S. commitment, thereby toppling the coup-prone military government in favor of a neutralist civilian regime which preferred to make peace on its own. Finally, of course, there is the possibility that North Vietnam was genuinely interested in exploring the possible political gain in ending the war or at least of avoiding U.S. escalation. Hanoi's response did conform with the only serious likelihood of a negotiated settlement envisaged in the earlier political estimates of possible responses to alternative courses of U.S. escalation. If the bombing was to bring Hanoi to the conference table, this would most likely occur between the time the threat became credible and when it was put to systematic use. This analysis held that the North Vietnamese would not negotiate under the visible and explicit pressure of air attack because they would calculate this was too concessionary a context. It would encourage the U.S. to revive the threat at each point in the negotiations where it was unsatisfied with the terms. If, however, North Vietnam wanted to test the negotiatory situation and to avoid the bombing, the optimal time for its vantage point was before the threat became so prominent and explicit as to make clear to all parties it was negotiating under duress.



The Gulf of Tonkin raids did make explicit the threat of U.S. air attack which had been hinted at in high-level remarks and Washington press stories. However they were officially justified as reprisal attacks, a one-time phenomenon whose recurrence was linked exclusively to further attacks against U.S. forces. The vigor with which President Johnson subsequently argued against his campaign opponent's advocacy of bombing the North further framed the raids as purely punitive and retaliatory. But Hanoi's propaganda together with that of Peking had repeatedly asserted that a U.S. "threat" to bomb the North did not frighten North Vietnam. Peking's immediate dispatch of fighter squadrons to Hanoi following the reprisal raids was accompanied by official statements which denied these raids were retaliatory and saw them as part of the "signalling" of the U.S. threat.

In this context, Hanoi's willingness to meet for secret talks in Rangoon takes on an added dimension of interest already anticipated by political analysis. By the same token, an American refusal to talk could be interpreted quite differently in Hanoi from the way it was intended in Washington. At least it would provide a precedent for shaping perceptions in Hanoi of subsequent proposals for private contacts between the two sides. The ramifications of the situation were far-reaching, deserving the most careful consideration before defining the U.S. response. However, as was to become the pattern, all information was held among a few top officials with no opportunity for analysis by those whose skills and responsibilities might have provided an additional dimension of perspective.



One point is sufficiently important as to be worth repeating: there is no evidence by which one can assess with confidence Hanoi's "sincerity" or motivation in accepting the U Thant proposal. Neither at the time nor in retrospect was there reason to believe that those who made policy in Washington and Hanoi were in proximate agreement on mutually acceptable ways of ending the war. A priori reasoning, then, does not make this appear to have been a "missed moment" for peace. However only actual talks could have answered this question definitively. In any event, the incident illustrates the degree to which political choice was determined by bureaucratic practices.

Admittedly the problem of controlling access to sensitive information is perpetual in government. It is not subject to simple solution. Human beings are vulnerable to the temptations of power and influence. To the degree that professional political analysis can be kept apart from policy prescription it will more reliably meet the need. The official who keeps the analyst in ignorance of some information may thereby be able to get independent confirmation of his own hunches. Moreover by keeping from the analyst pending policy moves and decisions he can minimize the possibility of receiving a slanted report aimed either at flattering his ego or arguing an alternative policy. In the last analysis, however, personal judgment, not fixed rules, must prevail with each individual case handled on its own merits. Only by providing the most complete and continuous access to all information which might conceivably fall into the categories of "signal" and "response" can the policy-maker derive the maximum



benefit of independent political expertise. Whether this is done by an ad hoc "task force," informal liason on a regular basis, or through formal additions to the National Security Council and the policy bureaus, full two-way communication is essential to this process.

### In Perspective

The policy process is sufficiently inchoate to make impossible a "quick fix." It is equally immune to the influence of most individuals other than the President and, under normal circumstances, of most organizations. These observations are truisms but they bear statement at this point lest our deliberately narrow focus mistakenly give the impression that "if only these things had been different," U.S. policy in Vietnam would have avoided much of the cost and sacrifice. So far as the elements of covert activity, intelligence estimates, and political planning are concerned, this is not a viable conclusion. It places inordinate weight on factors whose contribution falls somewhere above marginal but well below decisive. They did not change the minds of men otherwise disposed against involvement nor did they tip the precarious balance of evenly divided opinion on where U.S. interests lay and what courses of action should be adopted in their pursuit.

Indeed, the reflective participant in the policy process can easily succumb to a sense of despair and futility at identifying critical points of responsibility to hold accountable in praise



or blame, inter alia admitting his own impotence at influencing the outcome. He comes to see it somewhat like a huge iceberg. Astride its tip are numerous men, hanging on by their fingernails and diligently chipping away with icepicks. Below the surface lies its invisible massive bulk on which vastly larger numbers are blasting off huge chunks with demolition kits. Each man, above and below the surface, thinks he is determining the flow of the berg. Actually, of course, its direction is basically determined by the weight of the ice, the current of the water, and the temperature of the sun. Cumulatively over time the chipping and blasting may affect the course somewhat but the primary forces at work are more elemental than human.

Yet the political scientist cannot rest content with this analogy. His responsibility is to determine the process, to discover its shortcomings, and to designate means of improvement. Whether one views our Vietnam policy as a success, a failure, or still in doubt, there seems little question that it might have been done better. Moreover, government is not responsible only unto itself. It must endeavor to serve the society to the fullest extent and in the most responsible way possible. The functions of intelligence and of policy planning are difficult but not impossible to realize. It is reasonable to ask that they meet policy needs or that efforts in this direction be abandoned.

Admittedly part of the problem is endemic to bureaucracy.



The most familiar cry, "they don't listen to me," is heard constantly at the wailing wall separating policy-maker from professional expert. The larger the bureaucracy, the louder the wail. In the last analysis, most governments leave the final point of decision in the hands of one man and one man obviously cannot "listen" to very many others. In spite of these obstacles and imperfections, however, efforts at innovation and improvement can help to avoid disaster, if they cannot in themselves bring about success.



NOTES

1. The author entered the Department of State in September 1961 as a member of the Special Studies Group under the Director, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). In August 1962 he became director of the Office of Research and Analysis for the Far East in the Bureau. He left this position in August 1966 to become Deputy Consul General in Hong Kong, from which he resigned in September 1968.
2. Speech by President John F. Kennedy, June 6, 1962, cited in Roger Hilsman, To Move A Nation, Doubleday, New York, 1967, p. 410.
3. For documentation, see Hilsman, ibid., pp. 525 and 529.
4. Ibid., pp. 420 ff., discusses the origins of the "Farmgate" missions in the Taylor-Rostow report, President Kennedy's reaction thereto, and Hilsman's opposition to press secrecy.
5. See, for instance, L. Fletcher Prouty, "The Secret Team and the Games They Play," The Washington Monthly, II, No. 3, May 1970, pp. 11-19.
6. See, for instance, recent remarks by Professor John K. Fairbank, The New York Times, July , 1970.
7. Glenn D. Paige, The Korean Decision: June 24-30, 1950, The Free Press, New York, 1968.
8. This is not to present the DIA as a monolith. The three military services preserve their personnel, their inputs, and their respective points of view. In some instances, one will differ with the others to the point of expressing its dissent in writing.
9. See, for instance, the works of Graham Allison and Charles Hermann.